

## **Scrutiny Children & Young People Sub-Committee**

Meeting of held on Tuesday, 3 March 2020 at 6.30 pm in The Council Chamber, Town Hall, Katharine Street, Croydon CR0 1NX

### **MINUTES**

**Present:** Councillor Robert Ward (Chair);  
Councillor Sean Fitzsimons (Vice-Chair);  
Councillors Jerry Fitzpatrick, Bernadette Khan and Callton Young

#### **Co-optee Members**

Geoff Hopper (Voting Parent Governor Representative)

**Also Present:** Councillor Alisa Flemming, Cabinet Member for Children Young People and Learning  
Councillor Margaret Bird  
Councillor Andy Stranack  
Robert Henderson, Executive Director, Children Families and Education  
Kerry Crichlow, Programme Manager, Children's Improvement

**Apologies:** Councillor Gareth Streeter  
Councillor Sue Bennett  
Dave Harvey (Co optee)  
Elaine Jones (Co optee)  
Paul O'Donnell (Co optee)

### **PART A**

#### **12/19 Apologies for absence**

Councillor Gareth Streeter gave his apologies, Councillor Andy Stranack was in attendance in his absence.

Councillor Sue Bennett gave her apologies, Councillor Margaret Bird was in attendance in her absence.

#### **13/19 Minutes of the previous sub-committee meeting**

The Minutes of the previous meeting held on 21 January 2020 were approved as an accurate record.

#### **14/19 Disclosures of interest**

There were no disclosures of interest.

**15/19 Urgent Business (if any)**

There was none.

**16/19 Action list update**

The Sub-Committee reviewed the action list which was now up to date with a large percentage of the actions completed and those outstanding with an expected date of completion.

The recent trip to the CALAT centre in Thornton Heath was successful, giving Members the opportunity to meet and interact with the students. In particular the working relationship between staff and students was praised.

Members welcomed opportunities like this to get out into the community to interact with services and service users, and would welcome future such sessions.

The Chair informed the Sub-Committee that a specialist social worker from the National Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) centre would attend a future meeting to raise Member's awareness of the issue and of Croydon's work in this area.

**17/19 Children's Improvement Plan Update**

The Executive Director for Children Families and Education provided an update on the Improvement Journey during which it was noted that the department had recently undergone a three week Ofsted inspection which ended on 14 February 2020. The full report and rating was due to be published on 16 March 2020.

The draft letter had been received and as a result of the recommendations from the inspection, which will be shared at the next meeting of the Sub-Committee, the improvement plan would be updated.

Steady progress was still being made in all areas of the service although there were still areas that required further improvement. This was reflected in the recommendations made by Ofsted following their inspection.

The Chair thanked officers for their attendance and looked forward to receiving the revised improvement plan at the next meeting.

The Sub-Committee came to the following **Conclusion:**

- The Sub-Committee looked forward to notification of the outcome of the Ofsted inspection and the revised improvement plan in response to OFSTED recommendations.

**18/19 Children's Looked After Pledge and Care Leavers Local Offer**

The Executive Director for Children Families and Education presented the report, during which the following was noted:

- The Pledge was an overall commitment to Croydon's children in care and leaving care population, which set out what the Council and its Partners had agreed to provide.
- There had been a Local Offer in place in the past which was criticised as being vague and inconsistent in its application.
- The proposed Pledge and Offer was still in the initial stages of development with further work needed before it launched including a greater analysis of the financial implications.
- In drawing up the draft pledge, the department worked with Empire (Children in Care Council) as well as the Leaving Care Forum to gain insight on their historical experiences.

The Sub-Committee was given the opportunity to ask questions on the content of the report and the information provided during the presentation.

Concerns were raised that the pledge gave the impression that young people would be given anything they asked for and that some of the wording used may be misleading or interpreted in the wrong way. Officers highlighted that this Pledge was about rights and responsibilities, with social workers tasked with undertaking assessments and negotiating on an individual basis to reach an agreement with the young person on what was available and right for them. There would be an ongoing assessment process in place. The Commitments in the Pledge were intended to be broad to assist in identifying young people's needs. Officers appreciated the feedback and comments and agreed to reflect on the broadness of the language used.

A Member suggested that additional thought should be given to how the Council could ensure that life events of its care leavers were celebrated. Officers agreed that this was an area of priority and as such had initiated a weekly open house dinner at the Turnaround Centre to enable young people to socialise. The cafeteria at BWH had also been booked for a Christmas dinner for this year.

In response to a question about the extent to which Children's Services encouraged care leavers to maintain links, officers confirmed that care leavers were encouraged to maintain contact with their foster carers. Some opted to use the 'staying put' option and remained with the foster carers at a reduced rate until they were ready to live independently.

In response to a question about the affordability of care packages, it was highlighted that some things were currently being funded with extensive work due to be carried out with the finance department on the budget prior to the presentation of the paper to Cabinet.

To follow up it was asked if the amount allocated in the budget was likely to increase and whether the service could be deliverable within budget. It was

advised that a contingency would be put in place to allow for overspend until the average spend could be realised over a number of years.

At the conclusion of this item the Chair thanked Officers for their attendance at the meeting and their engagement with the Sub-Committee's questions.

The Sub-Committee came to the following **Conclusions**:

- The decision to revive the Local Offer and Pledge for young people was welcomed and seen as a positive step towards addressing the inconsistencies in support for care leavers.
- Further work was required on the paper before it was presented to the Cabinet to fine-tune the details of the Offer for young people.
- It was important that careful consideration be given to the language used in order not to raise unrealistic expectations.
- Further work was required to gain a greater understanding of the financial risks involved in the scheme to ensure that it was deliverable.

#### **19/19 Question Time: Cabinet Member for Children Young People and Learning**

The Cabinet Member for Children Young People and Learning, Councillor Alisa Flemming gave a presentation, during which the following points were noted:

- The consultation period for the Children and Young People Plan was coming to an end, the vision had been updated and once findings were formalised the final details would be disseminated
- There was still much to do to ensure there was a balance in the amount of cases held by social workers.
- A new Virtual Head had recently been appointed which had given pace to the service, resulting in a positive impact for both the service and children served.
- There was an open invitation for young people to attend the Corporate Parenting Panel to put their views across, allowing their voices to be heard directly.
- There remained challenges in the leaving care service in ensuring good access to support for young people, adequate preparation for them in leaving the care system as well as improved housing and gateway service.

- Further work was needed to address recruitment issues. Currently 61% of staff were permanent employees with a lot of work invested in improving this area.
- The service continued its pilot of whole family partnership which put families at the centre of decision making and looked to address the complex needs of both young people as well as the adults in a family unit.
- There were challenges in DSG and High Needs Block and although there has been investment from the Government it was not rising at the same pace as the level of need.
- The Legacy Youth Centre had been successful with a good uptake in the number of young people attending. All LAC children were able to access the centre as their membership had been paid for. The Ofsted inspectors visited the facility and had spoken to young cared for children in attendance.

Following the presentation the Sub-Committee was given the opportunity to question the Cabinet Member on the content of the report and the information provided during the presentation.

Concern was raised over the statistics for off-rolling and exclusions, and the level of support being offered by the Council to support families. In response it was advised that there were link officers in place who worked directly with schools to improve standards in accordance with attainment targets and also to support children by helping to keep them in mainstream education.

The stability of the workforce through the increasing number of permanent staff recruited to the service was commended.

A Member raised concern about the measures used for missing LAC children. It was questioned how improvements could be realised with the number of children going missing and improving RHI figures which remained consistently low. The Cabinet Member advised that this was an issue of national focus with more work to be done to address the issues concerned. There was complexity around why young people go missing and where they went. Regular multiagency panel meetings took place with the Police and Health Service. RHI offer was over 90% but take up remained low, in particular with young 17 year olds.

It was questioned what was being done to improve the educational performance and outcomes of KS4 and KS5 children. The Cabinet Member acknowledged that there had been more of a focus on KS2 outcomes which had impacted on KS4 and KS5 performance. The priority was now addressing issues with KS4 with measures being taken such as the merger of colleges and work with CALAT.

It was questioned what was being done to monitor spending and school budgets. It was highlighted that there wasn't an obligation for schools to inform the local authority of their budget, with any information provided on a voluntary basis. It was often found that schools were more willing to have an open dialogue when they were experiencing difficulties and the Council provided support in various ways during these instances.

It was further questioned what was being done to address the effect of surplus places in schools on both budgets and performance. Additionally whether lessons had been learnt from the issues that led to the closure of St Andrews Church of England School. It was acknowledged that due to parental choice, some schools were left with surplus spaces and the Council was aware of those schools at risk. Support was given to schools through working with them on reduction of classes and exploring ways to manage budget.

Members raised concern about the risk of other schools suffering the same fate as St Andrew's School and questioned the means of identifying schools experiencing similar problems to ensure that adequate preventative support was provided. The Cabinet Member said that the Council took all necessary steps to explore ways to support a school prior to any decision on possible closure, with the final decision not made by the local authority. As part of lessons learnt, the Council was consistently monitoring schools with early intervention processes in place to be deployed where necessary. It was further acknowledged that the closure of St Andrews was a great loss for local residents, the Council and Croydon as a Borough.

A Member questioned the rationale behind the decision for Octavo services being brought back as an in-house service. Officers advised that Octavo was commissioned for a fixed period and the contract was coming to an end. A decision was made to bring the service back in house for a number of reasons which included difficulties experienced by other LA's that had procured private companies to run the service as well as the lack of coordination and communication between Octavo and the Councils Education department. It was felt that the Council could deliver the service that Octavo had but better whilst retaining the training offer, protecting the name and reputation they had held with schools. Additionally the service would be brought back in house to a bigger infrastructure at a period that the service was moving towards a Locality Model of service delivery.

In response to a Member question on how the decision had been made for the location and site of the Legacy Youth Centre, it was confirmed that during the development stage, it had been agreed that the site must be as close to the town centre as possible due to transport links. Ofsted visited the centre as part of their inspection and were impressed.

As a follow up it was asked what could be done to address the concerns of some young people about their personal safety when travelling to the site. It was highlighted that there would always be complexities and the Council would always work to safeguard children. There were regular police and

neighbourhood safety officer patrols around the site, all working to prevent confrontation between young people as much as possible.

A Member noted that on their visits to the site they had spoken with many young people who were pleased with the provision of the centre. Previously many young people who may have been loitering in the town centre, possibly getting in trouble were now making the decision to go straight to the centre after school to utilise its facilities.

The Chair informed officers that at the next meeting, the Sub-Committee would expect them to demonstrate how they were driving up standards and using evidence lessons learnt from this Ofsted Journey.

At the conclusion of this item the Chair thanked the Cabinet Member and Officers for their attendance at the meeting and their engagement with the Sub-Committee's questions.

The Sub-Committee came to the following **Conclusions:**

- The dedication of the Cabinet Member, Senior Management and all staff in Children and Education services in the Improvement Journey was commendable.
- It was evident that the accountability framework for school oversight was not always held by the Council which often made it difficult to hold the Cabinet Member and Executive Director to account in certain instances.
- It was important for the Sub-Committee to discuss in detail accountability issues in terms of school standards, with work needed to explore whether a different approach was needed to ensure the appropriate persons/bodies were invited to meetings.
- A piece of work on understanding the remit of the relationship with the Department for Education, what powers were held and accountability may need to be arranged for the next cycle of meetings.
- Depending on the outcome of the Ofsted inspection, there may be opportunity for in depth scrutiny on Education and School Standards.
- The high level of Croydon missing children remained problematic and a cause for concern. This was an area that the Sub-Committee must continue to be sighted on for further scrutiny.
- The decision to bring the Octavo services back in-house should be reviewed in detail in six to twelve months to determine the effectiveness of the business plan and implementation. Additionally the response of schools to the changes and how training needed were being met.

**20/19 What difference has this meeting made to Croydon's children**

At the conclusion of discussions, the following points were made:

- Further discussion was needed on how to ensure that the correct bodies were brought before the Sub-Committee to be held to account.
- The opportunity to challenge the Local Offer and Children's Pledge whilst providing suggestions on improvements and in early development stage was beneficial.
- That officers were reminded of the ongoing work that was needed to increase their efforts on the recruitment and retention of good quality staff.

**21/19 Work Programme 2019/20**

The Chair confirmed the three items on the agenda for the 14 April 2020 meeting of the sub-committee as stated on the work programme was:

- Children's Improvement Plan Update
- Workforce and Financial Sustainability- Long Term
- Safeguarding Themes: Neglect, Vulnerable Adolescents & Children with Disabilities

It was agreed that an informal session would be arranged to discuss work programming for 2020/21 cycle of meeting

The Chair of the Task and Finish Group, Councillor Jerry Fitzpatrick asked it be noted that the group had reduced from five to four members.

The meeting ended at 8.52 pm

**Signed:**

**Date:** .....